

“The code is... ‘Eye, fragment, and glass’, according to Denver. She done did a fine job, boss.”

Lan Yen spoke through the radio, his voice obscured by small noises and interference. I could give him a response without being audible, but I decided against it.

...There was no time to be loitering around sending my thoughts when that person was ahead of us.

“And now we take a turn in this direction.”

One must accompany a guide to explore the Ring’s corridor.

The reason is that the corridor has countless doors; the passageways connect to one another by intricate and complex rules. Getting lost in a space as linear as a corridor may sound unlikely, but I’m sure it’s more than possible in this one.

In the footage she filmed, Lapis showed us our destination in the corridor, and the guide here... this “Ring member”, brought us to the entrance.

And as they say,

One who knows where the journey begins and ends will not lose the way.

In other words,

Now that we are allowed in the corridor, there is no need for a guide.



“Here we arrive at the VIP room, Mr. Red Gaze. Please wait here until Master Jumsoon arrives to give you a more detailed explanation on the art—”

Having outlived their usefulness, the guide’s words fade away with no ears to fall upon.

Next, the guide’s body loses balance and collapses, their ankles having been slashed.

“Sir?!”

Garnet was always like that.

Even though he’s witnessed a good many deaths he could do nothing about,

Even though he's realized that the warm hand of a comrade on his shoulder could cast him aside and measure the price of his life at any moment,

Even though he was aware that this world is far too removed from ideals like "reason" or "ethics" for him to consider the tragedies he's seen as wrongful,

"W-what are you..."

He is always distraught by the suffering inflicted before his eyes.

"Our infiltration mission ended once we entered the corridor, Garnet."

That's why I have to deliver this as matter-of-factly as I can.

I want Garnet to grow into a person who doesn't agonize over the sufferings.

"We should try and make this quick."

This gladius is fitted with a heating mechanism.

The searing heat of the blade cauterizes the wound.

It prevents this guide whose only fault was letting us in from bleeding out. They will likely survive.

They might recover from the concussion sooner or later and call for backup.

But this is no time to spill blood.

Garnet's eyes dim upon hearing my words.

Whether it be the lunae of disillusion, despair, or expectation—it doesn't matter.

I want him to soak in the darkness, to let it slowly consume him. It's what he needs to live a normal life.

"I can't afford to repeat the scarcity of time to you twice. Let's move."

Leaving behind a deliberately cold remark, I walked on.

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"A branching path."

The passage that seemed to extend endlessly came to an intersection.

The correct path was already determined, but it wouldn't be a bad idea to let Garnet come up with an answer. I maintained a willful silence, waiting for him to speak up.

"I think we should take a right turn. I just... feel like that's the right way."

He may not know it himself, but Garnet is good at deconstructing and piecing together information. Internalizing the Seven Association's workflow he's seen during their Fixer qualification test might have helped, but I believe most of it can be attributed to his powers of observation that stem from the refusal to be a mere bystander to the suffering of others.

"It's no surprise that you feel that way. You know where we started and where to go."

A correct answer deserves an apt explanation. I began to mutter.

"One can only find their way in this corridor by recognizing those two points. Since we know them, we can traverse by feeling what directions to take."

"Reversion of causality... was it? I think I remember being taught in the Association's training programme that some Singularities take advantage of this."

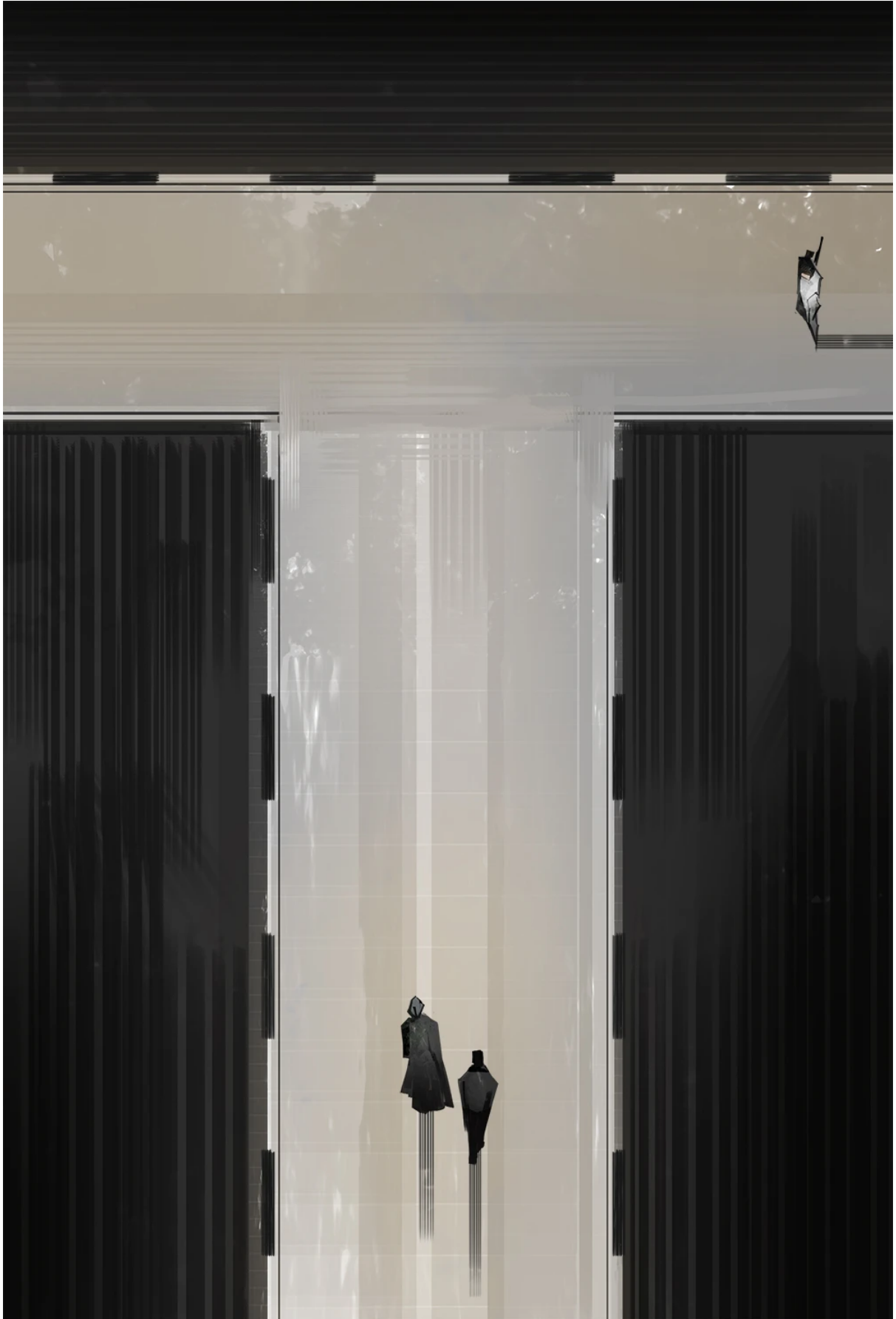
“That’s right. And try to talk less to other Fixers or clients. No one in the City welcomes a Fixer who’s in the learning stages. Make yourself look better than you are if it helps you earn your keep.”

“...Understood!”

Vim is restored in Garnet’s eyes.

As easily as he is disheartened, he can shake off the gloom just the same. Although I had no grounds to call it his faith, it's how his emotions usually flowed—that things will work out despite it all.

For a prosperous life in the City, perhaps such a mindset could be useful in the long term.



“...I hear footsteps.”

Reaching the end of the hallway, I could sense someone approaching from around the corner.

Long steps, composed and nonchalant.

A tall person, estimated to be at least 180 centimeters in height. Furthermore, someone who could stroll around the corridor like it's their own home.

"They're right around the corner...!"

Meaning it's a Docent.

"You're..."

A guest wandering around the Ring's corridor without a guide leading them can only be one thing: an unwelcome visitor. The Docent bursts out in pure rage the moment their eyes reach us.

"I knew it... You were just another money-grubbing Fixer after all. You used Master Jumsoon's passion for art to feed your own greed!"





The Docent didn't seem to have any patience for my side of the story as she gripped the pole tight and started running at me. An entirely emotional act, her reason dominated by anger.

The action I should take was made clear at that moment.

"...Make sure that you aren't ahead of me. Garnet."

Just as I felt the tiny movement of Garnet lightly nodding in the corner of my left eye...

Clash!

The steel pole flew in with unhesitating force and fiercely clashed against the blade of the gladius, creating a repulsive noise.

It's more solid than I anticipated. The swing I made with the intent to cut through the weapon didn't go as planned.

"Khh... I shouldn't have allowed you to meet Master Jumsoon!"

A furious scream flies straight into my face. It's undoubtedly out of an unadulterated rage.

Alas.

In order to draw out the full strength of wrath, it has to be rid of spite first. A refined wrath becomes the power to overcome hardships, while spiteful anger only clouds the eyes.

For instance, in a narrow space like this corridor, it would have been wiser to avoid engaging in close combat using a weapon as long as the Docent's.

However, those consumed by wrath will only lash out feverishly in a clash of emotions.

This is going to make things simpler.

Screeeeak!

An unpleasant hiss of metal scratching on metal. Her slight quivering in the noisy friction does not go unnoticed.

“Hgrk!”

As soon as I kick the lower part of the lengthy pole, all the weight she placed on the front collapses on her. Naturally, her body begins to tilt in the other direction.

The Docent is leaning more and more, and her pole is pinned down by the edge of my sword, disarmed.

Completely defenceless.

Lifting my other arm, I landed a fist directly on the unguarded solar plexus.

“Kuhg!”

I could feel her breastbone deform and break in two, before she was sent flying towards the end of the corridor.

“Garnet.”

With my eyes locked on the target, I sought out a glimpse of the presence behind my back and whispered in his direction.

“Go find the lab and get in there first.”

“Just me? Is that really gonna be okay?”

Saying “It will be fine” won’t relieve Garnet of his concern. I’ll need something to convince him.

I took my coat off along with the sheath and handed it to Garnet.

“Sir, that’s...!”

“Take my gladius.”

In all of his floundering, he managed to equip the coat and the sword firmly.

“The mental keywords Lan Yen relayed to you. You remember those, right? And our goal as well.”

“...Of course!”

Even if he was prone to waver in his feelings, he was upright at his core. That was the important thing.

The pitiful and heartrending struggle to hold his roots fast, grasping onto the smallest specks of dirt. That's what matters the most.

"You're... not going anywhere..."

The Docent stood up in the forking passage of the corridor.

It was clear from the get-go that breaking a bone or two wouldn't incapacitate them. There was just one thing.

"I'll deal with the obstacle. The path should be clear to your eyes as well."

"...Right!"

I only needed a second to adjust the direction a little.

"What are you babbling about?!"

A different color of outrage is painted over her pure rage.

Even if she can't hear the conversation, stopping in the middle of battle to have a casual exchange with a third party was sure to enrage her for being ignored.

That's what I was looking for.

The layer upon layer of anger was going to dull the sharpness of her mind.

"You're not getting away...!"

I gathered strength in my legs.

The feeling is rather different from controlling muscles; it's more akin to hydraulic cylinders and motors pumping energy into my right leg.

My next attack won't be easy to keep track of.

"You—"

The distance was closed in an instant. Like a marble launched from a slingshot, I approach the target at great speed. This momentum is asking to be exerted.

I simply opened my palm and placed it under my opponent's chin; her head was thrown back to an almost unnatural degree.

Using an augmented body is not unlike driving a car.

The procedure on my legs allows me to maneuver them similar to how you feed energy into a car's engine and speed it up by stepping on the accelerator. You could also argue that augments are like vehicles in that the feel of use as well as proficiency can differ depending on the manufacturer and model.

However, a vehicle is ultimately a tool; it is up to the driver to operate it.

The performance just now was a cumulation of my experience more than anything.

"Kgh..."

As I figured when I broke her breastbone, this woman is tough. Her cervical vertebrae are still intact from an impact that would've shattered those of a regular member. Even though she's passed out, it was only for a moment.

That fleeting moment was all I needed.

"Garnet—"

My arm extends and once again finds its fist in the center of her chest. The macabre sensation of broken bones being further buried into the body can be felt, and the feeling of the organs and muscles around them being torn apart is delivered through the skin.

But it doesn't quite lead to the feeling of a life being snuffed out; she had already detached from the fist, tumbling through a door at the end of the corridor.

I continued the sentence that had gone wayward for a second.

"Now."

"Ah... Got it!"

Garnet started sprinting after a brief answer.

I could have pursued the opponent and finished her off right away, but I chose to send Garnet on his way first. Incapacitating a Docent of the Ring without using weapons was going to take some time.

After watching Garnet turn the corner, I walked through the broken doorway.





In the massive hall, a myriad of purposeless doors lined the walls as far as the eye could see. There was no use in telling ceilings, walls, and floors apart from each other. If the door were to reassemble itself, I might have no way to return.

That's how this hall was designed.

The Docent finally makes a smile.

"You... If you know what kind of place this is, then you should know that it was a huge mistake to walk into this hall."

"Well, I can't say if it was, but that does sound like something I've heard often."

"Hmph, bluffing, are you?"

"...That one is not something I've heard often."

The Docent corrects her posture and lunges at me.

She looked ready to engage with me from a distance this time, either having calmed down or having determined that she would have the upper hand in this place.

Unfortunately for her, she will not have that space.

Artificially weaved muscle fibers once again build up strength.

Propelled with explosive force, I reached her without delay.

A fist is struck upon her chest yet again.

The impact of my hand colliding with her solar plexus, or the sorry remainder of bruised flesh where it once used to be, is sent to me.

If I can drop her off the edge into the bottomless chasm before she can regain her balance, the fight will be over.

There is the faint sound of crackling and shifting.

“...Finally.”

However, the tenacity of that Docent was nothing to scoff at. After taking three blows in the same spot, she adapts to the attack and manages to stay in place, returning a bloodied smirk.

The hall stirs with a strange noise. As though the floor wished to become the ceiling, the compartment the two of us were standing on began to steeply incline.

If I hadn't been here before, I would've been in danger of losing my footing.

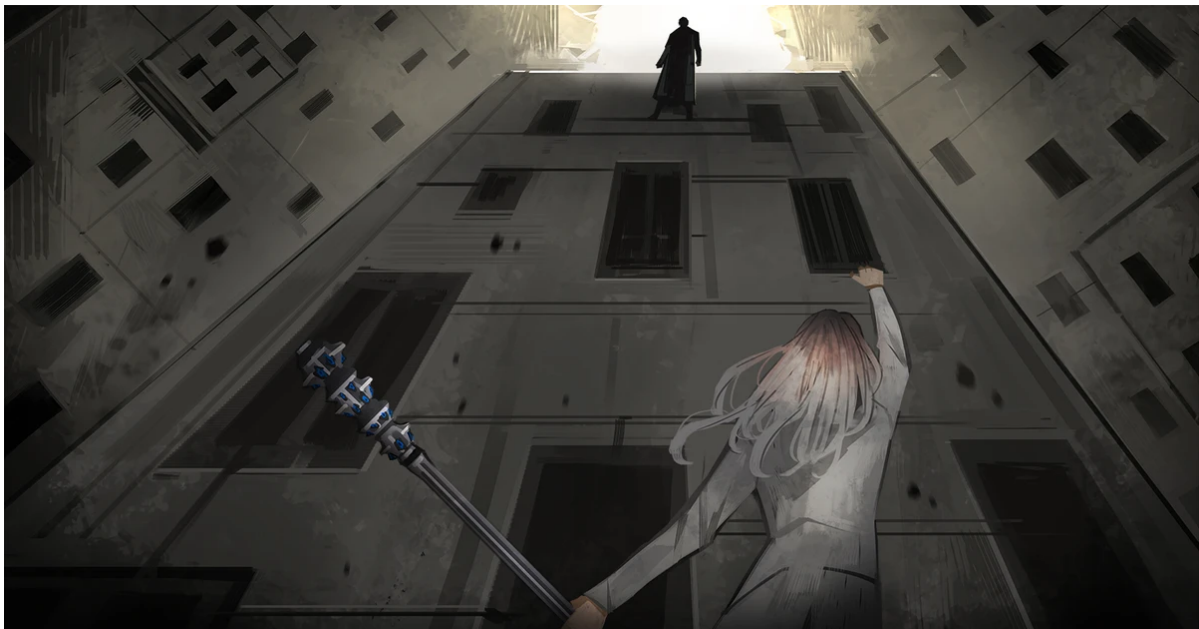
...If I hadn't, that is.

“You...”

The wish of the hall had come true.

The Docent was hanging onto the edge of the wall that now became a cliff. Though she is certainly at a disadvantage, her eyes are still animated. The stubborn determination to live, an urge to ascend the ledge at the slightest chance was burning in her eyes.

And right now, I am above her, a foot stretched right before her eye.



“Grr... How... You! I’ll drag you to the abyss with me!”

“I don’t know, it certainly looks like I have the high ground.”

Prolonging this battle any longer could pose danger.

I have to end it, now.

Right... It was something called 'Shin', if I remember her words correctly.

In that case, two Mang should be enough.

I deaden my breath, and clear my mind.

Rummaging through this bag of memories, I carefully fumble around the recollections and pick the heaviest and densest ones to fill my emptied head.

A group of children about half as tall as my waist gather around me.

Boxes wrapped in colorful papers, prepared for the kids. Snow-covered streets celebrating creation.

Emotions that may be trivial to others, but that are far more plentiful than I deserve.

A bouquet of such emotions that I could call absolution.

The bundle that resembled the sunlight scattered away, like beams fading behind dark clouds.

I remember every single moment of it.

I engraved all of them into my eyes.

The luna of hope I felt that day.

And the luna of despair I felt that day.



Two rings of light that resemble the glow of the moon wrap around my leg.

Carrying this nightly luster, the leg sorrowfully lands on the Docent as she climbs up the cliff, screaming.

“Kuh.”

With such lightness that I can barely hear the footfall, a sound so quiet that it's masked by her last gasp.

In a most airy descent, the moonlit leg crushed the Docent's miserably wounded chest.

It was neither the augmentation, blood pressure, nor the contraction of muscles.

The only thing that moved was the mind.

Kicking off with a recoil of the heart, I returned through the broken door presented by the hall.

So this is the power of the Light she mentioned...

The power of sin.

- Translation Notes:

To maintain lexical consistency between the original Korean and the Japanese/English versions, the proper nouns Shin «신(心)» and Mang «망(望)» will be written with romanization.

The proper noun ‘Shin’ «신(心)» is based on the Japanese pronunciation of the Han Chinese character, and pertains to the mind.

In the original Korean version, Vergilius’ description of various emotions all have «망» (Mang) present in them, such as: 희망 (Hope), 절망 (Despair), 실망 (Disillusion), 기망 (Expectation). As indicated in this book’s title, «망» is also the pronunciation of the Han character «望», meaning “full moon”. Given that Vergilius was originally a Roman poet, we’ve elected to use the Latinate “luna” (pl. “lunae”) alongside the emotions that evoke «망» to give a similar effect when not specifically referring to Mang as a proper noun.

